

A Question of Identity

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[0 : 0 0] Please pray with me. God, will you give us an increase of your grace so that we could truly hear your word brought to bear in our lives this day, and in doing so that we might bear forth the fruit of your spirit, your very character, your light actually in us and through us, and witness faithfully to you in this world in which we live.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. And please be seated. Will you please take out your Bibles in front of you or maybe your phone.

But in your Bible, you'll find it on page 904, our text today from the Gospel of John. And as Dan expressed, I have this privilege of kicking off our sermon series right through to Easter and beyond.

Not infinitely, but those few weeks following until we finish John's Gospel through the 21st chapter. So we return to this Gospel of John, having had a sermon series that took us up through chapter 17, and having left Revelation, we're still with the same author.

That is John. And chapter 18 to the end is what some people call our Lord's Passion. Some suggest that chapters 1 through 17 are an introduction to the Passion of Christ.

[1 : 4 6] But that doesn't mean that we can actually ignore the first 17 chapters. Let me just give you a really short synopsis in two parts of those 17 chapters. Chapters 1 through 12 focus on the signs and wonders performed by our Lord.

There were seven of them. Chapters 13 through 17 focus on our Lord's glory or the manifestation of His name. So the whole of John's Gospel then is actually revealing that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh and dwelt among us with the goal that we might believe that He is the Christ and therefore have eternal life.

You know that belief in Him is not small or easy. John wants us to know in chapter 3 that it begins with a supernatural birth, a need to be born again.

But that's only a start, as is the case with a natural birth. It requires then maturity and of course death. But for those who believe in Christ, eternity. The chapter before today's was a really important one.

You'll notice that today's chapter begins when Jesus had spoken these words. And it's often called the high priestly prayer. The people of God enjoyed a system of worship at the service of this high priest.

[3 : 0 4] But Jesus was and is a unique priest for God's people that is expressed in chapter 17 in that prayer. And He represented and represents God to the people and the people to God in that priestly position.

Chapter 17 was quite a private one where 18 is public. 17 was quite intimate where 18 is very caustic. In 17, that chapter is behind closed doors where 18 is now out in the open for the first half and the second half may be behind a wall.

18, chapter 18, is one of the darkest in the Bible. Not as dark as the death of Jesus on the cross, but this darkness is only second to that one.

These 27 verses divide nicely into two parts. And I'm calling the first one the garden of darkness and the second one the court of darkness. In the first we get a glimpse of the hand of darkness and the second one we get a glimpse of the heart of darkness.

Let me encourage you a bit though. But it's the light and the love of our Lord that stands out in this. He is full of grace and truth as John tells us at the beginning of his gospel.

[4 : 24] Full of mercy and kindness. None of which we deserve. All of which he takes delight in giving to us. So first, the garden of darkness.

Now we associate gardens with peace and serenity and tranquility and beauty. This garden represented something good at first for Jesus' disciples, but now all that's about to change.

It changes from a garden of light to a garden of darkness. And there are two things to notice in this garden. The first is that Jesus takes charge and the second is that Jesus takes a cup.

Okay? So first, Jesus takes charge. Now I want to ask you a question. Do you know what's going to happen to you in a week, tomorrow, or even this afternoon?

We think that we take charge, that we have charge of our lives. But how many of us can say, now, knowing that all that would happen to me, Jesus, look at this in verse 4.

[5 : 27] John wrote, Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward. When you read today's story, we get more than just an impression that Jesus is in charge, that he's taken control of the events.

Beginning with verse 1 and on, we realize that Jesus spoke. He went out. He entered the garden. He came forward. He was denied. Jesus isn't some kind of victim of circumstance or a volunteer for the job, but a commander that's guiding every step in this conflict.

Jesus is in charge. He's in control of the circumstances with no intentions whatsoever of avoiding the suffering that he's about to face. Jesus takes charge.

See how Jesus takes charge when a band of soldiers, officers, and a disciple comes toward him. Jesus comes forward and he asks a question that he's just been dying to raise.

He asks, who do you seek? They give an answer, Jesus of Nazareth. But by asking this question, Jesus is setting things in motion. He's taking charge.

[6 : 38] And Jesus' reply to the answer is, I am he. Pretty simple. Sound familiar? Here? Except he never said he here.

Jesus is claiming equality with the Lord, the one who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. And so three times Jesus states this in verses 6 and 8.

I am he. So Jesus is asserting that he's more substantial, he's more essential, he's more eternal, more real, and more right than they can ever imagine.

So much so that they can't even stand in his presence. And they just thought that they couldn't stand him. And so John tells us that they drew back and they fell to the ground.

That's how much Jesus is in charge of this situation. And this is encouraging, don't you think? That means that we can't really thwart the plans and the purposes of God because he's in charge.

[7 : 46] And yet everyone here is a failure. We're not all that different. I wonder if you see yourself in this story. I mean, think about your intentions to stand up for what you think is right.

Maybe you remember your failure to stick by a promise. or consider your greed perhaps for more impact and influence in your world.

Well, Jesus is taking charge to see his Father's will through to the end. He even takes charge in protecting his disciples from the death squads. He says that he will not lose one of these.

And Jesus loses no opportunity to save sinners by grace. That's Jesus taking charge. Well, now, in the Garden of Darkness, Jesus does something in addition to this.

Jesus takes the cup. And I wonder, do you have a favorite cup? I understand that Canadians have a favorite cup. And it's called the Stanley Cup.

[8 : 51] Cherished, but not to have visited Vancouver yet. That was not very fair, was it? Okay. But Jesus has a cup of his own. It alone is his to take.

But even though Peter tries to take matters into his own hands, right, Jesus isn't losing it to Peter's overconfidence to defend Jesus.

And so Jesus says to Peter in verse 11, put away your sword, shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given or graced me with? Jesus, like Peter, has blood on his mind.

But not the blood of his adversaries and enemies, but his own blood. Turn with me just to a second to Jeremiah chapter 25 and we're going to look at verse 15 and 19.

You're going to find that on page 652 of your Bible. Sorry, 653. What does Jesus have in mind when he's talking about this cup that the Father has given him?

[10 : 00] Notice the bold face, the cup of the Lord's wrath. Verse 15, Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, this is Jeremiah, take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.

He then goes down and lists all the nations that he's going to issue this cup of wrath to. Come down to verse 19 then. Sorry, verse 29. For behold, I begin to work disaster at the city that is called in my name and shall you go unpunished?

You shall not go unpunished for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth declares the Lord of hosts. Jesus is making a reference to the cup of God's wrath and the sword of his judgment.

Except Jesus is now going to be the one who's taking the wrath and the judgment upon himself in place of the nations. This cup of wrath will become the cup of salvation.

Jesus will do for the world what we cannot possibly do for ourselves. He will suffer the wrath and secure salvation for rebels. But what is the wrath of God represented in the cup that the Father gave to Jesus?

[11 : 19] What do you think wrath is about? I used to think that the wrath of God was just God handing sinners over to themselves. And to be sure, that's true.

Kind of a saying, well, if you don't want me, just have it your way. And Paul wrote about this in Romans chapter 1, verse 18, when he said, the wrath of God is being revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

He then goes over to say that God hands them over to the lusts of their hearts, their dishonorable passions, and their debased mind, handing people over to themselves.

Have it your way. But the wrath of God is much, much more than that. The cup the Father has given Jesus is God handing himself over to us.

In addition to giving us over to ourselves, now God lets us play God with his life. Instead of giving life, though, we took life.

[12 : 22] That is the life of Christ. And so Jesus experiences the wrath of God in our place. Paradoxically, the taking of life is then actually what gives life.

Jesus will suffer wrath, so we don't have to. And Jesus secures salvation because we can't get that for ourselves. Given the opportunity to put an end in evil, we got it all wrong.

But God used it to experience wrath for us to guarantee salvation. That's the cup that Jesus is drinking. It's the one that's represented when we come to this table and drink that cup.

So remember that any time you take matters into your own hands. Think of the worst that you've ever done. It's no worse than what Peter did in denying the Lord and taking out his sword.

Maybe you tried to change the outcome of something that went wrong. Or you tried to assert your own will and made matters worse. God has a different way. Jesus takes the cup of the Father's wrath and it becomes the cup of salvation as he takes charge.

[13 : 36] That's the garden of darkness with the light of Christ in the midst of it. Now, the courtyard of darkness. Jesus is taken from this garden of darkness to the courtyard of darkness.

And courts, as you know, are places that are meant to be of wisdom, truth, and justice. But that's not the case in this scene. There are two main events in this courtyard of darkness to look at.

The first is that Jesus is arrested and the second one is that Jesus is tested. First thing, Jesus is arrested. Now, when you hear the word arrested, you might think cardiac arrest.

Please, don't do it now. But you probably think legal arrest. And Jesus is arrested as a criminal who broke religious law, blasphemy, and other laws like not keeping the Sabbath.

The court of darkness begins with this in verse 12. And it's not the kind of court that you want to be in if you get arrested. The spiritual darkness of the courtyard probably exceeded the darkness of the garden.

[14 : 48] And where we saw the hand of darkness in the garden, now we see the heart of darkness in this court. The darkness is represented first by those who arrest Jesus.

Jesus is arrested by soldiers, their captain, and officers of the Jews. A band of them, we're told, is what actually comes to Jesus in verse 3 and 12.

And just in case you're wondering, you're not carrying musical instruments. This band is a cohort, a detachment. Conservatively, probably 200 soldiers, maybe as much as 1,000.

It seems a little bit like overkill, don't you think? Why send so many? Well, there was a lot of anxiety, fear, and threat among the religious and Roman leaders.

Jesus passed through a crowd once when the religious leaders tried to kill him. The Roman leaders knew that there could be a potential uprising at a feast like this. And the religious authorities wanted to get it right this time and left themselves no margin for error using all the Roman help they could get.

[15 : 55] So, Jesus is arrested. Notice the irony of this arrest, though. The one who is in charge and accuses no one is the one who's charged and accused now.

The one who released men bound up in their sins and even by demons is now bound up by his accusers. The one who opened his heart to the sick is now brought before the hardest of hearts, the stiffest of necks.

And it all seems reversed, inverted, backwards, upside down. And in the transition from the garden to courtyard, the gospel actually slips in this light of truth in the midst of deception.

Verse 14 reads, if you look, it would be expedient that one man should die for the people. For this purpose and passion, Jesus has come into the world, he's arrested, and he'll be killed.

Jesus is showing to his disciples what he commanded them, what he told them back in chapter 15, that greater no man have than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

[17 : 09] Jesus is now taking it even further. Yes, he'll lay down his life for his friends who deny him, who betray him, but he lays down his life also for people who reject him, his own people, all of the people of the world.

He knows the darkness of our hearts and he is arrested and will die for us. That's Jesus arrested. This leads to Jesus tested.

In the other gospels, Jesus is tested or tempted by the devil at the beginning of his ministry. The devil doesn't overtly test Jesus in John's gospel. However, in verses 19 through 27, Jesus faces a test that's as evil as the one in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry.

And in this case, the test or trial is in the court of darkness. But there's nothing just about it. This trial has an examination but no cross examination.

Only a cross that's outside the court. There will be no hung jury but only a man who is hung. And the test isn't pass or fail but life or death.

[18 : 27] So after our disciple, Peter and Jesus arrive in the court of darkness, the unfair trial begins. The main figure is Caiaphas. He's a chief priest, a puppet figure of Quirinius, and replaced Annas, who is his father-in-law.

This father-in-law behind the scene is probably the one who's calling the shots and trying to earn his income in the temple through sacrifices because he's no longer in the position of a high priest.

Anas is the heart of darkness behind Jesus' test. So dark is Annas' heart coaching Caiaphas that over 12 rules, principles, practices of a fair trial are broken in this trial.

I won't go through them with you. But look at the key verse with me, key verses, verses 19 to 21. John tells us, the high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.

Jesus answered him, I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple where all Jews come together.

[19 : 35] I have said nothing in secret. Now the accused in a fair trial cannot be questioned or testify against himself. Jesus lets the high priest know he's on to him and that he knows the law and that he knows that they know the law too.

And he does that when he then states this in verse 21. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard what I've said to them. They know what I said. Also, you too know what I said.

And so Jesus turns the tables again instead of being the one who's tested, now is the one who's testing. Jesus gets to the heart of darkness and to the heart of the gospel.

And the high priest has a problem with Jesus and his teaching and that is exactly the issue. The issue being who is Jesus and what did he teach?

The high priest thinks that Jesus is planning something in secret. Caiaphas thinks Jesus is about to wreck his religion, their people's religion.

[20 : 45] But here's the gospel. This is what's at issue. Jesus isn't a strategist. He's a savior. He's not a strategist.

He's a savior. And his light is actually brought into that garden, into that court, into our lives. And his light shines in the darkness and it cannot overcome who he is.

And everything is brought to light so that it can be dealt with by his death and only by his death which makes him a savior who delivers, who redeems, who reconciles, who makes whole, who brings us to the place that only he can bring us to into his light so that he can be our Lord.

Now, does that sound a little silly or stupid? I hope not. But we can treat Jesus the same way. Christianity can be something other than this good news.

It can become a method for getting ahead or improving our quality of life. It can become a strategy for running a better organization or a system. Or it becomes a tool for getting the upper hand in performances or a resource or technique for reducing pain or risk.

[22 : 06] Christianity is not a strategy, a method, or an idea. It's just news. It's good news about the word of God made flesh and dwelt among us.

Imagine that. That's why John's purpose in writing this gospel is that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have eternal life.

So where does this leave us? What are the implications? Let me just share one with you. Turn with me to the first lesson that was read in Ephesians. Paul's letter to this church in Ephesus, page 978.

I'm going to read verse 1 and part of 2 with you and then I'm going to take us down to verse 6. Paul writes, therefore be imitators of God as beloved children and walk in love.

That's what we're called to, walk in the love of Christ as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. A fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[23 : 25] That's what Jesus did when he took the cup. Verse 6, let no one deceive you with empty words for because of these things, here we are again, the wrath of God, you know what that is now, comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Therefore do not become partners with them for at one time you were darkness. It's that word again. But now, here we are, you are light in the Lord, walk as children of light.

It's the application of this. Jesus is the light of the world who shines into the darkness because of what he's done for us that we can't do for ourselves. We then become children of that light.

His light in us, his light that works through us, his light that actually extends into the world in which we live. He is the light of the world and we are his little lights.

Lights shining in the darkness. So let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Amen.